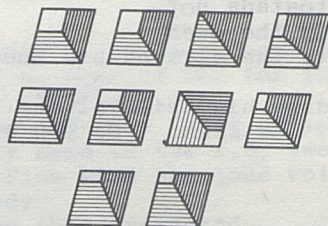


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AT EL PATIO THE WORKERS FRATERNIZE

i.

Often Andres and I drink beer after work.
We sit in the parking lot in my car and discuss
work, Mexico and the U.S.
He tells me the flies in America are lazy.
"In Mexico," he says. "The flies swarm onto your meal
and are so fast that you cannot swat even the slowest
one."
"Here," he says, weaving his hand slowly through the
air, "The flies are very slow and very lazy."

ii.

After work Manuel, the head cook, enjoys himself.
He goes and sits at the end of the bar,
drinks Miller Lites and smokes L&M cigarettes.
He is in his fifties but his skin is still smooth
and although he is never outside in the sun
he is very brown.
He has a way of smiling,
of narrowing his eyes at me,
and running his finger along his moustache
that makes me think he's about to squeeze
one of my tits or mutter something obscene.
When I ask him a question in the kitchen,

he will lift the hem of his apron,
wipe his hands and walk toward me
with narrowed eyes.
He comes very close to me,
but this is because he is nearly deaf
and can hear nothing over the frying of tacos.

I come up to Manuel while he is sharpening
the butcher knife because I have to explain an order.
He smiles, and rubs the long knife against the metal
sharpening rod.
I tell him the customer is weird,
that she wants her tostada hot,
wants it to be put in the oven.
And her husband wants the eggs on his Huevos Rancheros,
runny.
Manuel smiles, grinding his knife at me.
"And what about you?" he asks. "Do you also like things
hot and runny?"

iii.

Nearly every man at El Patio is shorter
than I am,
so Manuel begins calling me "Grandota"
which means "the tall one."
Because of my height the guys seem to assume
I've never seen a dick.
On slow nights they test me.
When I walk into the kitchen to leave dirty dishes
or fetch clean towels,
Raul will waylay me with a long, thick carrot
that he waves in front of my face
or sometimes with a pointy jalapeno
which he holds in the palm of his hand.
"What's this look like Grandota?" he will ask.
And every time I say, "My sister."
Then Raul and Alberto, who've been listening,
break into that sound reminiscent of an ambulance
or of someone falling over a cliff.
"Ayyyy, Grandota!" they yell and then they turn
the radio up.

iv.

Alberto is horny,
but then all of the cooks are.
But I just get the feeling
that Alberto with his scrawny shoulders
and too wide hips, encased in Sergio Valente jeans,
never gets very much.
He always asks the waitresses,
in Spanish,
if we want to see his dick.

We tell him we don't want to see anything so small, a gibe which has led to his present epithet: peanut pecker.

When Alberto removes the toothpicks that have held the tacos together during frying, he inadvertently breaks the shell.

"Can't you spread anything without breaking it?" asks Gayle. "You've got to learn to spread things a little more gently, honey."

v.

Fina, is married to a man twenty years her junior. It's rumored that he married her for the 'papers,' that he is a very ambitious man, that he has a good job as a truck driver, although he's only been in the U.S. two years. But I think that Fina with her loud voice and top-shaped body makes him work for that greencard. "Come on," she'll yell at the assistant cook, when he's slacking on the orders, "If that's how slow you move at night your wife must not be very happy."

vi.

When it is really slow and we have no one to wait on, we talk to the busboys, most of whom have a limited knowledge of English. To Juan and Jorge we plead, "Make the customers come." It took them a long time to realize just what we meant.

vii.

Late at night after the restaurant is closed and only Antonio is left there to sweep under the booths, Andres comes to my house and we talk about everyone. It gives us pleasure to gossip when no one at work knows we know each other. It makes us feel omniscient. Andres tells me that Fernando is really a joto even though he pretends to leer at the waitresses. I tell him Maria is after Raul even though Raul is married to Kathy who, I add, believes Mexicans are the fourth race and that she is still a virgin because her baby was delivered by caesarean section.

He tells me that Raul thinks he's smart
because he knocked up Anna
the sixteen year old hostess
after last year's Halloween party.
"He thinks he knows more than everybody," says Andres.
"Just like Manuel. He thinks if he spray the restaurant
he'll get rid of all the cucarachas."

viii.

Everyone discusses the cockroaches at work:
the busboys, the dishwashers, the cooks
and especially the waitresses.
We find them everywhere --
lurking in coffee cups,
baked into enchiladas,
even in the walk-in freezer.
Bertha remarks,
after swatting a roach with the gothic novel
she's reading, that when the world ends
only the cockroaches will remain.

ix.

The cockroach fogger,
that Tony, our boss, grudgingly invested in,
is an object of amusement and curiosity
for many of the employees.
Fina, the cook, is never happier
than when she has come upon a nest of roaches
in one of the storage rooms.
Then she gets Alberto and they wheel out the fogger
which looks like a shiny, black vacuum cleaner
with mysterious, luminous dials.
Fina and Alberto crouch
and point the nozzel at the nest,
smiling as the foul smoke drifts out
and sends the bugs scurrying.

When I work Monday mornings
the fumes from the fogger are very strong.
I now know how to say I have a headache in Spanish
something I say every Monday when I become dizzy.
The insecticide covers everything.
The tables are spotted with it
like windshields that have dried after rain.
The vinyl of the booths looks particularly shiny
as if they have just been waxed.
All the glasses and the jars of chili peppers
are covered with white towels
like furnishings in an elegant summer home
that must be uncovered for the season.
In spite of the towels,

all the knives, forks, glasses and various utensils are sticky with the poison.
We must wash our hands a lot on Mondays
and try not to rub our eyes.

x.

At the Christmas party, held in the Aztec room,
everyone is out of uniform and in real-life clothes
and nearly everyone is dancing.
Maria with Lupito, Alberto with Bertha.
I dance with Andres,
a fast two step where my arm rests over his shoulder,
a basic John Travolta where we sweat,
and Cumbia where I fumble
and Andres makes fine patterns with his small black shoes.
The music is so insistent
that even Manuel takes a waitress on his arm
and cuts loose.
Later,
Andres and I sit in a booth on station four.
I say that it's strange to be sitting in the spot
where only hours ago I had been serving enchiladas,
that it's strange to be relaxing
where I work.
He nods.
In a day we will be back
Andres for his tenth year,
I for my seventh month.
When a grey roach walks across the table
we make no move to kill it.
"Siempre la cucarachas," says Andres.
"Siempre El Patio."

-- Jill Young

Long Beach CA

THE GIRL WHO'LL SAY ANYTHING

i.

doesn't know how to stink. Every morning,
all day, and half the night she uses every
imaginable soap, shampoos full of protein,
covers herself with lotions and powders,
takes special pills. Her very sym-
pathetic, long-suffering, handsome, morose,
sommambule, tall, coughing, leering, leak-
ing husband also tries every method in
his little black book but has been unable to
make her stink.